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Frank Stronach: Canada needs a democratic revolution

The best solution to break the stranglehold that political parties have on our democratic process is to introduce citizen representatives into Parliament

Frank Stronach

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In my column last week, I argued that our system of government no longer works and needs changing. I cited some evidence that our country is mismanaged — from rising debt to a deteriorating economy. But the key point I wanted to drive home was that our country is heading in the wrong direction. By a whole host of measures, we're getting worse, not better.

When I first came to Canada in the 1950s, most families only needed one income-earner to enjoy a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, own a home and a car, and take annual vacations. That's virtually impossible today.

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Even 30 years ago, a young couple with good jobs — a plumber and a teacher, for example, or a nurse and a salesman — could afford to buy a house in the suburbs and still have money left over to send their children to university and put some savings aside for retirement. But that dream is also out of reach for most couples today.

Why are our living standards rapidly declining? And more importantly, what can we do to halt the downward slide?

I believe the number 1 problem we face is that our country is managed by political parties. As a result, we are governed by short-term political decision-making, which often results in policies that don't make the most economic sense.

The best solution to break the stranglehold that political parties have on our democratic process is to introduce citizen representatives into Parliament — democratically elected, non-partisan citizens who would have a say in all economic and national affairs. It's a proposal I've championed for many years now, including in this National Post column.

Citizen representatives would vote on all bills brought before the House of Commons and would effectively hold the balance of power in Parliament. In short, they would provide a vigorous counterbalance to the unchecked power of governing political parties.

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When you look back in history, most cultures had wise councils. The ancient Roman Senate — or "council of elders" — was typically the chamber where the republic's wisest and most experienced citizens would dispense counsel and strategic advice.

I envision that our country's citizen representatives would act as a type of modern-day council of elders. As a result, I believe citizen representatives should be required to be at least 50 years of age and have the endorsement of at least 300 fellow citizens.

Ideally, they would be citizens who have enjoyed successful careers and could bring significant business experience from various industries and professions to their role as citizen legislators. I believe there are a lot of good Canadians with valuable experience who want to serve their country and who would be willing to run as citizen representatives.

In terms of where these elected representatives would sit in Parliament, one option would be to have them replace the political appointees in the Senate. Introducing citizen representatives into the Senate would allow the upper chamber to provide a vigorous check on the power of the House of Commons.

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The proposal most often put forward for reforming the Senate is to create an elected Senate, but this would do little to break the partisan stranglehold that currently dominates our political affairs. Electing senators of various party stripes will simply create another layer of politicians — the last thing we need in a country that is already overly politicized and over-governed.

The main problem with having citizen representatives sit in the Senate is that it would require a constitutional amendment and the odds of that happening are very low. Any change would require the consent of the Senate, the House of Commons and the legislative assemblies of at least seven provinces representing half the population — the so-called "7/50 rule."

A more feasible option would be to have the citizen representatives sit in the House of Commons alongside members of Parliament, which may not require a constitutional amendment. If that were to

happen, the House would become rather large and cumbersome, since there would be one citizen representative for every three MPs. As a result, we could reduce the current number of MPs by about one-third — from 338 to around 225.

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Regardless of where they sat, citizen representatives would make our country more democratic and more accountable, and would give Canadians a much stronger voice in all national matters and a say in the type of legislation that affects their jobs and their pocketbooks. Most importantly, Canadian citizens would wield the deciding vote in how their money gets spent.

National Post
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Frank Stronach is the founder of Magna International Inc., one of Canada's largest global companies, and an inductee in the Automotive Hall of Fame.

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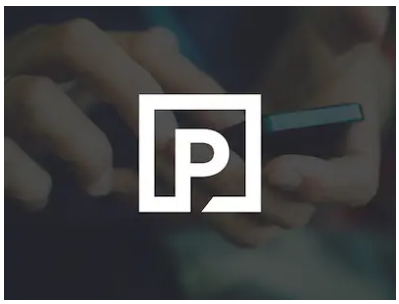

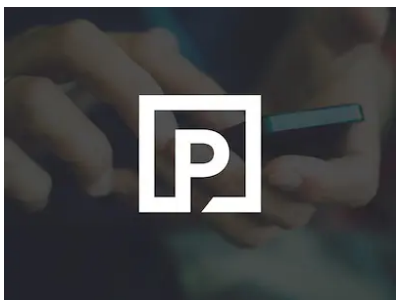

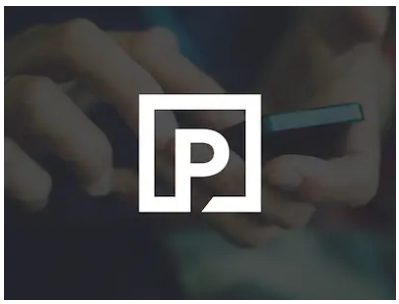

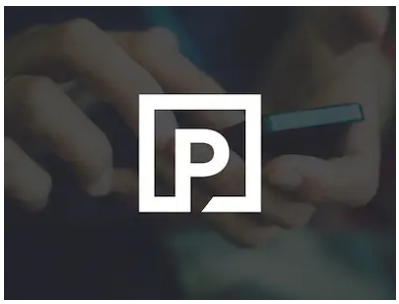

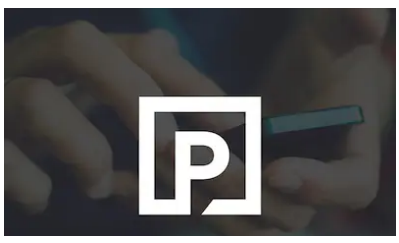

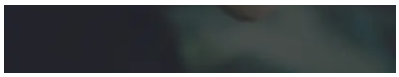

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